

Aren't All Religions the Same?

By Rev. David Bisgrove

To get us started, I'm going to briefly address one of the obstacles frequently raised when any particular religious dogma is brought up: "There can't be just one true religion." This objection can be alternatively stated, "Aren't all religions the same? Isn't it just a matter of personal preference on which one chooses to get to God?"

When the topic of God or religion comes up, it's fairly common to hear people say something like, "How can anyone really claim to have cornered the market when it comes to the truth about God and the nature and destiny of humanity? That kind of statement is exclusive and arrogant and intolerant and divisive. It leaves people feeling angry, defensive, or inferior. Those kinds of truth claims undermine our ability to get along in a pluralistic culture."

Let me grant two parts of that premise. First, when this topic crops up the rhetoric often becomes heated, and those representing the Christian position (I can only speak for that tribe) aren't always respectful toward those who disagree. Consequently, Christians have to look in the mirror and take responsibility for what is frequently a divisive discussion that leaves both parties angry.

I'll also grant a second part of the premise, which is that it's inherently divisive to hold two contradictory positions. My wife thinks TV is made for movies, and I think it's made for ESPN. That doesn't mean we are hostile, only that we hold two different views of reality.

What I want to do is challenge the statement that all religious claims are ultimately the same. In fact, such well-intentioned statements are, in the end, just as dogmatic and exclusive as a Christian's claim that Jesus rose from the dead.

The claim that all the major religions generally believe and teach the same thing is another way of saying that theology isn't really all that important, since all major religions talk about an all-loving God who accepts and embraces people. For example, it's not uncommon to hear someone say, "I'm *spiritual* but not religious." Holly Hunter, who was interviewed before the TNT debut of *Saving Grace*, reflects this point of view:

"I would say, yeah, I'm a spiritual person," she said. "Do I believe in God? I don't know what that really means. I don't know what my personal connections with G-O-D are. But spirituality is soulfulness. Is there...an energy that's higher than mine? Yes. But would I claim it as God? I would say no. But does that make me a spiritual person? I would say yes....Am I

a religious person? No. Do I go to church? No. Do I believe in organized religion? That's dubious."¹

In other words, this line of thinking claims that what's really important is that everyone defines God for himself or herself. It maintains that dogma, theology, and definitions concerning God are secondary to an individual spirituality, which seeks to build bonds of understanding with one another rather than defining beliefs based on our differences.

On the surface that sounds great, but in the end the argument is not compelling because it's inherently inconsistent. It says theology isn't important but then asserts a theology about the nature of God that actually conflicts with the major religions. For example, Buddhism doesn't believe in a personal God, while Christianity and Judaism and Islam do. You don't have to drill very deeply to find just how significantly those differences manifest themselves.

The main point here is that positions like "Everyone is free to define God for himself or herself" or "All religions are basically the same" are themselves theological claims about the nature of ultimate reality that *differ* from the theological claims of an orthodox Christian or Muslim. Saying that theology doesn't matter IS in the end a theology, because it asserts a position on the nature of God – even if that assertion is somewhat foggy.

That's just one objection often raised against the exclusive claims of something like Christianity. Here is another: "No one religion has all the truth. Together they all contribute to the whole." A frequently used analogy is that religious truth is like group of blind men who come across an elephant. One man describes it as long and flexible (the elephant's trunk). Another says, "No, it's thick and hard like a tree" (its leg). Yet another says, "No! The creature is large and flat" (its side). It all sounds very humble: No one can see the whole elephant, because you need a community of people offering different perspectives to get the complete picture. The argument goes, "The same is true of religions – all contribute to a larger body of truth."

Despite the appearance of humility, however, the person claiming that no one can see the whole elephant is in fact doing the very thing he or she says is impossible. The person is saying, in essence, "I have the perfect vantage point to see *all* of the elephant," or in this case, *all* of spiritual reality.

One more argument is also frequently heard: "It's arrogant to insist your religion is true for everyone and then to try to convert others." In other words, "There are lots of smart people out there who don't believe what you believe, and

¹ Holly Hunter in "Heaven Helps Her. Can She Save Herself?" by Edward Wyatt, *The New York Times*, July 21, 2007. [NYTimes.com: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/21/arts/television/21hunt.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/21/arts/television/21hunt.html?pagewanted=all) (March 31, 2011).

it's arrogant to try to convince them that they're wrong. You therefore should respect that and keep your religious views private and away from the public square."

This objection grants that multiple religions hold opposing views of reality. It insists, however, that "They should all be privately held and never taken public. Arguing for your position – whether over a glass of wine or in an Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times* – is disrespectful and undermines a democratic, open community. It's okay to practice what you believe in your home or mosque or synagogue or church, but you have to check those beliefs at the door when you leave those places. Keep public discourse secular."

Stephen Carter, professor of law at Yale Law School, has made an interesting observation about this point of view. He notes that efforts to craft a public square from which religious conversation is absent, no matter how thoughtfully worked out, will always in the end say to the religionists that they alone, unlike everybody else, must enter public dialogue only after leaving behind that part of themselves that they may consider most vital.²

This claim about personal views underscores a key point, which is that a false distinction is frequently made between the religious and the secular, between what is often characterized as those who function primarily by faith and those who function primarily by reason. In reality, there isn't much difference at all.

What then is "religion"? It's *a set of beliefs that explain what life is all about*. It answers life's questions:

Where did I come from?

What happens to me when I die?

What's my ultimate purpose in this world?

Why is there disease and brokenness?

Someone expressing the secular view might say the material world is all there is. The answer to "Where did I come from?" is "You're a byproduct of random cosmic events. You're here by accident. When we die, that's it. Consequently, the highest virtue is to do what makes you happy and not have your beliefs challenged." That reply is a view of the world, a master narrative that seeks to answer the existential questions of why we are here and what eternal consequences, if any, our actions and attitudes have.

On the other hand, a Christian or a Jewish person says humanity is created in God's image. We therefore seek to live in light of God's purposes and plans, with the hope of living eternally in his presence.

² Stephen L. Carter, *The Dissent of the Governed: A Meditation on Law, Religion, and Loyalty* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press paperback edition, 1999) 90.

One is a secular view, and one a religious view – but both are positions of faith that can't be empirically proven. Even though adherents of the more secular position don't gather on Sundays or sing hymns together, both positions drive people's views of how the world should go. One position should not be required to be checked at the door while the other gets a pass.

The point is that in the end, all skepticism, when unmasked, is just an alternative belief. No matter how polite you are, how careful you are not to use religious language, you and everyone else hold *some* faith position that describes ultimate reality. Granted, Holly Hunter's position sounded more tolerant and open, but it is a belief about God nonetheless.

For instance, you might say, "I don't believe in Christianity because I can't accept the existence of moral absolutes. Individuals should determine truth for themselves." Fine – but just grant that you can't empirically prove that position. Your *doubt* about moral absolutes is a *leap of faith* no different than a position arguing that morality is based on the character of God who hardwired our spiritual DNA.

Then again, you might say, "My doubts aren't based on a leap of faith. I have *no* beliefs about God. I'm just agnostic on the whole topic and have no interest in thinking about it." Underneath that statement, however, is a very modern American belief that says God's existence is only relevant to the degree that it meets your personal emotional needs. Despite expressing indifference, you are betting your life that no God exists. You're betting that since you feel no need for God, in the end no God will hold you accountable for your life. Again, your position might be right or wrong, but in either case it's a faith position about the nature of ultimate reality.

I'd like to offer a challenge to both Christians and non-Christians. Examine your assumptions. Take them for a test ride with one another. Recognize that all of us live on a continuum of faith and skepticism, assurance and doubt.

And for those of you who haven't settled what you believe about God, at least recognize that beneath all of your arguments against something like Christianity are a set of alternative beliefs. These faith positions are no less a "leap" than the faith positions of those who go to church, pray, and read their Bibles.

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